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PK, IN, BG

SUBJECT: THE PROFOUND CHALLENGES OF SECURING BANGLADESH'S BORDERS

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

[¶](#)1. (C) International terrorists seeking a safe haven find Bangladesh's porous land, sea and air borders inviting. Just how far Bangladesh must go to secure those borders has come into clear focus after several recent USG and United Kingdom assessments. The reviews indicate nothing short of a fundamental change in Government of Bangladesh mind-set and operations is needed to tackle border security problems. The international community will have a crucial role to play if Bangladesh is to succeed in securing its borders but will need to better coordinate what has been a haphazard approach toward security assistance.

A FLURRY OF RECENT BORDER ASSESSMENTS

[¶](#)2. (C) In recent months a series of border assessments and exercises have thrown into stark relief the stupendously high hurdles Bangladesh must overcome to secure its borders. Among the U.S. projects was an analysis of Bangladesh's counterterrorism capability by the State Department's Office of Anti-Terrorism Assistance (ATA) released in May. Another was an assessment of border management practices by the Department of Homeland Security's Customs and Border Protection (CBP) released in September. In June, the United Kingdom organized a "table-top" exercise involving 17 Bangladeshi agencies to assess border management capacity. Several U.S. Department of Defense training exercises also assessed border patrol capabilities. Each exercise separately uncovered huge gaps in border security.

[¶](#)3. (S/REL TO USE, FVEY) Among the foreign terrorist groups taking advantage of Bangladesh's porous borders are Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LT) and Hizbul Mujahadin (HM), who have ties to Harakat ul-Jihad-i-Islami, Bangladesh (HUJI-B). Those groups use Bangladesh for attack preparations, training, fundraising and recruitment for attacks in India. The Government of Bangladesh has cracked down on the main home-grown terrorist group, Jamaatul Mujahidin Bangladesh (JMB), but has not pursued the Pakistani

groups with the same vigor.

BANGLADESH GETS LOW GRADES FOR BORDER SECURITY

14. (SBU) The Anti-Terrorism Assistance report assessed Bangladesh's border security threats and capabilities on scales from one to five. (Note: A level five security threat was the most critical, while level five security capabilities were the most comprehensive. End note.) The threat of a terrorist incident involving land borders and land ports scored a five. Meanwhile, the rating for land security capability was a lowly two. The threat of a terrorist incident involving maritime borders and ports of entry scored a four, but the security capability rating was just a two for maritime borders and a three for ports of entry. The threat of a terrorist incident at airports rated a three, as did the security capability.

ONE REPORT DETAILS POROUS LAND AND AIR BORDERS ...

15. (SBU) The Homeland Security report provided sobering details to flesh out those ratings. At Benapole, the largest international land crossing point in Bangladesh, border management operations "appeared chaotic and poorly organized as pedestrians, drivers, customs brokers, and other unidentified individuals appeared to circulate freely in the 'no man's land' between the Bangladeshi and Indian ports of

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entry." The assessment also noted that customs officers performed "only rote cursory inspections" of baggage and that vehicles entered the crossing without undergoing inspection. At Zia International Airport in Dhaka, the report said, the smooth movement of passengers appeared to be the main concern of immigration officials. It also said the use of magnetometers to screen passengers for dangerous weapons was "futile" because inspecting officers never requested to see what set off the machines' alarms. One member of the team intentionally carried a knife with a 3-inch blade. The knife set off the alarm, but the inspectors did not search him.

16. (SBU) The Homeland Security report also found problems with the use of the United Kingdom-funded FORTRAC computer system to input passenger information at immigration posts. In particular, FORTRAC did not link all ports of entry to share information; the lack of computer infrastructure to make those connections hindered the "rapid exchange of critically needed information and degrade(d) border management." In an interview with PolOff in September, Mohammad Shah Alam, a special superintendent of police and Bangladesh's foremost FORTRAC expert, noted Bangladesh was updating the system to allow database connectivity among border points and to make possible the use of machine-readable passport readers, fingerprint scanners and cameras. He confirmed, though, that many of the land border crossings still were not fully integrated into the system. At least initially, only a handful of passport readers and fingerprint scanners would be available. (Note: The United Kingdom is supplying 52 passport readers for Zia International Airport, and Canada is considering a project to connect land border crossings to FORTRAC. The many fingerprint scanners used by the Election Commission during its recent nationwide voter-registration drive also could conceivably be integrated into the border control system. End note.)

...WHILE TWO OTHERS DETAIL WEAK MARITIME SECURITY

17. (S/REL TO USA, FVEY) During a 10-day Joint Combined Exercise for Training in May, U.S. Navy SEAL and Special

Boat experts concluded that maritime interdiction capabilities of the Bangladesh Navy, Coast Guard and Bangladesh Rifles were minimal. The U.S. team found major equipment shortfalls and inadequate training. Of seven interdiction boats used by the Navy and the Coast Guard, for example, several were incapable of moving in reverse or traveling faster than 10 knots per hour. In October 2008, a Subject Matter Expert Exchange team from the U.S. Pacific Command assessed the Bangladesh Navy's maritime interdiction capacity to be virtually non-existent. Bangladesh Navy officials acknowledged rampant maritime arms smuggling in its territorial waters conducted by Chittagong Hills-based criminal networks associated with insurgents from northeastern India and Burma. The officials also suspected Bangladesh was a transit zone for heroin smuggled out of the Golden Crescent in South Asia and the Golden Triangle in Southeast Asia.

YET ANOTHER OUTLINES TENSION WITH CIVILIANS

¶ 8. (S/REL TO USA, FVEY) A six-week Joint Combined Exercise for Training by a U.S. Special Forces Detachment with the Bangladesh Rifles 39th Battalion in spring 2008 identified tense relations with the local community as a major problem for border patrols. (Note: The Rifles are the main border patrol group in Bangladesh. End note.) The Special Forces team found Bangladesh Rifles personnel manning border outposts in Chapai Nawabganj in northwest Bangladesh did not meet with local leaders and civilians, who in turn viewed the border force as arrogant and corrupt. Many villagers were reluctant to talk to Special Forces personnel when a Rifles officer was present. One example of the disconnect with local

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communities: Funds from a rewards program operated by the Bangladesh Rifles went to Rifles personnel involved in seizures and not to community informants. Little doubt, then, that Bangladesh Rifles operations appeared directed from headquarters in Dhaka and not based on locally generated intelligence.

BETTER COORDINATION IS KEY

¶ 9. (SBU) A key problem identified by the U.K. table-top exercise, and confirmed by the Special Forces team at Chapai Nawabganj, was a lack of coordination among the many Bangladeshi agencies with responsibility for border control. The post-exercise report recommended 17 operational and tactical measures, many of which would help create a more unified approach. At the operational level, for example, the report suggested establishing working groups to consider ways to ensure the effective sharing of information and intelligence; the creation of a national database to hold biometric data and criminal reports; and provision of a secure nationwide communications system. At the tactical level, the report proposed several measures to improve port and border security, such as considering the use of remote sensor technology, aerial surveillance and community policing.

¶ 10. (SBU) Better coordination among Bangladesh agencies and foreign counterparts also is needed. The U.K. report called for improving regional and bilateral information and intelligence sharing. Shah Alam said that Bangladesh responses to Interpol requests for information typically can take weeks or months due to red tape and the use of outmoded technology, such as faxes, to communicate among domestic agencies. He added that no international watch lists had been integrated into Bangladesh's FORTRAC database to provide real-time information on border crossings of suspected terrorists. To do so, he said, would not pose a technical problem but would require a change of bureaucratic mindset within the Bangladeshi government.

A CHANGE IN BANGLADESHI PRIORITIES NEEDED

¶11. (C) The Government also needs to make counterterrorism a higher priority in border security management. The Homeland Security report, for example, found that revenue collection appeared to be the main focus of border activities.

"Immigration and Customs officials, Special Police, the BDR (Bangladesh Rifles) and other agencies must move beyond the primary focus on revenue collection and additionally actively search for persons and items that present a transnational terrorist threat," it said. Shah Alam said the main focus of FORTRAC was to root out illegal emigration -- particularly to stop fraudulent agents from sending Bangladeshis overseas with false promises of employment -- and not to counter terrorism. Another systemic problem identified by the various assessments was the quick rotation of border security personnel from place to place. They are moved so frequently that they never get a chance to fully understand local trends of smugglers and other infiltrators.

COMMENT: FILLING THE GAPS IN BORDER MANAGEMENT

¶12. (C) There have been few, albeit insufficient, efforts among the foreign community to coordinate border management assistance programs. One example of cooperation was the participation of a U.S. Pacific Command representative in the U.K. table-top exercise to assess Bangladesh's border management in June. Many bilateral assistance programs have been channeled through the International Organization for Migration (IOM), which has not provided an overarching strategic framework for strengthening border security. It is not uncommon for donor nations to be unaware of projects

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funded by other countries and managed by the IOM. A newly established counterterrorism working group of representatives from the U.S., U.K., Canadian and Australian missions has identified the lack of donor coordination as a serious drain on efforts to improve border management. Members of the working group have started to share information and to consider strategies to ensure the missions work better together.

¶13. (C) A Septel will follow outlining Embassy plans for providing training and other assistance needed to improve Bangladesh's border management to counter the threat of terrorism. The proposals will be informed not only by the gaps in border management identified by the many recent assessments, but also by a greater understanding of the assistance plans of U.S. allies. To that end, the four-nation counterterrorism working group will meet regularly to discuss strategies for helping Bangladesh improve its border security and to coordinate assistance to maximize effectiveness. The new head of counterterrorism at the British High Commission told PolOff enhancing cooperation among the working group would be a top priority.

Moriarty